

CHAPTER 3

A STRANGE MIXTURE OF FACT AND FICTION: BEING A BRIEF HISTORY OF SIKKIM

161 **S**IKKIM has a population of close on 110,000, of whom 25,780 are said to be Lepchas of one sort or another; but this figure does not distinguish the very large number of men who have intermarried with women of other tribes and whose offspring are accordingly no longer to be reckoned as pure Lepchas. There are no accurate figures available of the total pure Lepcha population of Sikkim, but I imagine it to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of 13,000. What can be said, however, without fear of contradiction, is that this number is steadily decreasing year by year. The reasons for this are at present not clear to me; but I believe the principal cause to be contact of the easy-going and extremely non-materialistic Lepchas with the excessively virile, more thrifty and individualistic Gurkhas. The latter, finding insufficient land in their own country, are ever seeking for fresh places in which to settle; and during the process the Lepchas have been to a great extent absorbed or at least driven further and further into the hills. The settlement of Gurkhas and others in Sikkim is now controlled; but the Lepchas have already decreased to such an extent that legislation can now do no more than retard their complete extinction, that is, as a separate tribe, for a few years longer. They claim to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim. They are of Mongoloid appearance and speak a language which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group.

173 The early history of Sikkim is mainly based on Lepcha
 197 oral tradition, but the reigning family seems to have been from the first Tibetan. The Tibetan form of Buddhism, generally known as Lamaism, is believed to have been

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854

AK5 Lepcha AK5

APRIL, 1848.

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Before proceeding to narrate my different expeditions into
Sikkim and Nepal from Dorjiling, I shall give a sketch of 128
the different peoples and races composing the heterogeneous
population of Sikkim and the neighbouring mountains.

The Lepcha is the aboriginal inhabitant of Sikkim, and 101
the prominent character in Dorjiling, where he undertakes 144
all sorts of out-door employment. The race to which he
belongs is a very singular one; markedly Mongolian in
features, and a good deal too, by imitation, in habit; still
he differs from his Tibetan prototype, though not so
decidedly as from the Nepalese and Bhotanese, between
whom he is hemmed into a narrow tract of mountain
country, barely 60 miles in breadth. The Lepchas possess 773
a tradition of the flood, during which a couple escaped to
the top of a mountain (Tendong) near Dorjiling. The 173
earliest traditions which they have of their history date
no further back than some three hundred years, when they
describe themselves as having been long-haired, half-clad
savages. At about that period they were visited by
Tibetans, who introduced Boodh worship, the platting of
their hair into pig-tails, and very many of their own
customs. Their physiognomy is however so Tibetan in its 174
character, that it cannot be supposed that this was their
earliest intercourse with the trans-nivean races: whether
they may have wandered from beyond the snows before the
spread of Boodhism and its civilisation, or whether they
are a cross between the Tamulian of India and the
Tibetan, has not been decided. Their language, though [177]
radically identical with Tibetan, differs from it in many 119
important particulars. They, or at least some of their 173
tribes, call themselves Rong, and Arratt, and their country
Dijong: they once possessed a great part of East Nepal,
as far west as the Tambur river, and at a still earlier
period they penetrated as far west as the Arun river.

1144- In the anthropology of the Rong, a two-fold classification
174 is shown : a Mongoloid and a non-Mongoloid element. Our investigation has shown us this two-fold element in the religion and the economy of the Lepchas. From an anthropological standpoint we would like to draw a line of difference between the hunters and the farmers, thus forming two typical groups. The hunters with their hunting religion, sociology and economy represent the tall Rong type and are characterised by the larger physical build, the long small face, the open eye and the long small high nose. The farmers, on the other hand constitute the second group with shorter physiques, broad faces, broad nose, Mongolian eyefold, and prominent cheek bones.

Thus we see that the Rong bear evidences of a mixed culture, and this helps to solve many contradictions concerning them. Some believe that they have connections with the Tibetans. Others say that they wandered from the east along the Burma-Assam mountains. Our own belief is that the hunting component of the Rong are the primitive indigenous inhabitants of the forests of Sikkim. The farmers came from the east and have connections with such people as the Naga, the Lolo and the Miao.

197 The Rong language belongs to the pure group, that is
174 to say, to the pronounless Himalayan group of the Tibeto-
144 Burman languages. This bears out the facts that they experienced no Austro-Asiatic influence in the language as the Limbu did. Consequently the Austro-Asiatics cannot be held responsible for the non-Mongoloid element among the Lepchas. The only possibility is that among the pure Tibeto-Burmans and in a wider sense among the Tibeto-Chinese, there is an element purely non-Mongoloid and another that is Mongoloid. The study of the Rong therefore throws light on the Mongoloid problem and shows a formation of the Mongoloids within the Tibeto-Chinese Family (Tibeto-Burman is the large sub-group of this family of languages) and, in a very marked manner, among the farming peoples. This is in perfect agreement with the results of our research in Tibet. I found that the Tibetan Mongoloids are represented among the farming population. The cattle breeding nomads have very few Mongoloid features or none at all. Hence it is that

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in Tibet also, the Mongoloids are farmers. In the regions of North-West China, in Tsing-hai and Kan-su, we found that in many Chinese, living there, the Mongoloid element was completely lacking or present in a very negligible manner. These people are also of a larger build; they have the long, high-bridged noses, the long narrow faces and in many cases the Mongolian fold is not to be found. One might object that this was due to the influence of non-Mongoloid peoples like the Tibetans and the Turks who repeatedly overran these districts and ruled over the people for long periods of time. We shall refer later to the Mongoloids in China. At this stage it can be said that in China, the pure Mongoloids came from the farming inhabitants in Eastern and Central China as we have proved in the first chapter. One cannot quote the Mongols as counter evidence, as they are a very mixed and younger culture with strong agricultural influences. 197 174 144

We shall not deal in a detailed manner with the customs and habits of the Lepchas at birth, betrothal, marriage, death and burial. There is only one more point which I should like to touch upon: the judging of the Lepchas through the descriptions of European authors like Gorer and C.J. Morris. The two authors describe these people as being dominated by a strong, a very strong, sex complex. J.H. Hutton remarks in his foreword to Gorer's book, "Another aspect of Lepcha life which is almost as striking as the absence of aggression, is the apparent obsession of the whole community with sex. I was tempted to suppose that the author of this book had overemphasised the Lepchas' attitude to sex through an unconscious dramatisation, a journalistic dramatisation, if I may call it so, of a want of reticence on sexual matters of all kinds in a degree quite unfamiliar in his own society. The perusal, however, of Mr. Morris's book shows that I did Mr. Gorer an injustice. At the same time I am rather inclined to feel that the apparent preoccupation of the Lepchas with sex does not necessarily imply that the importance attached to it by them in their lives is proportionately theatrical. One is inclined to wonder whether this consciousness of sex is the cause or the result of the Lepchas' declining population, a decline of which the Lepchas are acutely aware. Probably, if there is any such connection at all it is by now a vicious 121 114 831 [52] [67]

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in other places. The Rong women are not so simple as to be taken in by such a man-made legend. They, on the contrary, affirm that the sexual maturity of girls and the development of the secondary sex characteristics occur without sexual relationship with man. The only difference is that the breasts of the girl who had had sexual relationship with man would produce some milk. The Maharaja of Sikkim and other educated Sikkimese, who read Gorer's book, found his description to be a defamation of the Lepcha character. ⁸³¹
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[827]

The Lepchas are the descendants of the first brother Lepcha, as reported above. They fall into three divisions, which are named after the districts in which they live. The Ilame Lepchas live in the Ilame district of Nepal; the Dandjung Lepchas on the other side of the Tista river in Sikkim; the Dam-sang Lepchas in Indian Sikkim and Bhutan. The second brother was called God-she, and is the father of the Jimdar tribe. The third was Meche, and he is the proto-parent of the Meche. Each of these three have a different language.¹¹³ ⁷⁷³
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B. SIKKIM YAK-TAMBA

There is in Sikkim a class of people who are called Limbu by the Nepalese and Tzong-pa by the Tibetans. They call themselves Yak-tamba, Ek-tamba and Ek-tambu. Tradition has it that, after the Lepchas, they are the oldest inhabitants of the place having settled there before the Tibetans and the Nepalese came to settle in the land. They are intermixed with the Rong in a very remarkable manner. At the present time they inhabit the land to the west as far as the river Arun as we have already pointed out before. They are regarded as divisions of the Limbu and bear a very close resemblance to them. The Yak-tamba have flatter faces and more Mongoloid features than the Lepchas. ⁰⁰⁸

C. THE BHODJA OF SIKKIM

The Tibetans who migrated into Sikkim are called the Sikkim Bhodja. Legend links the Tibetan Je-khye-bu-

113. cfr. the report of the Rai given above concerning the first parents and their three sons; see p. 7, 38. Here we have the same content of the myth.

5. Lepcha

● 197 The Lepcha kinship terminology presents a distinctive set of problems not previously encountered in our review of the field. Our data on the Lepcha, both linguistic and ethnographic, are fairly adequate, and this situation in itself constitutes something of a novelty. Gorer has contributed a remarkable study of Lingthem, a Lepcha village in Zongu (Sikkim) in which Lepcha culture has been preserved as a relatively homogeneous unit. Morris has written a popular account involving some of the same material, and the folklore has been studied by Stocks. Both Gorer and Stocks give lists of kinship terms, which agree in most respects and tend to supplement one another. On the ethnographic side, Gorer gives us a complete picture of clan organization, marriage regulations, kin behaviour, etc. Stocks' article includes scattered notes on Lepcha customs, and marriageable and non-marriageable kin are indicated as such in her list of terms, but this material includes a number of obvious errors and is not entirely trustworthy; Gorer remarks (p. 41) that her notes "correspond in practically no particular with my observations". On the linguistic side, the grammar and dictionary of Mainwaring, the latter carefully edited by Grünwedel, supply a rich storehouse of raw material, perhaps as important a single source as any in this general field. Gorer's unkind remarks (pp. 39 sq.) can scarcely be justified, especially in view of the fact that his own incorrect forms

197 and generally deficient linguistic handling of the material can be interpreted only through recourse to the works of these two scholars. The forms cited below are those that appear in the dictionary by Mainwaring and Grünwedel (cited as MG), though the aberrant forms given by Gorer and Stocks are occasionally noted. The Lepcha lists in Campbell and the LSI are of no especial importance (Campbell has evidently confused some of the terms).

193 Lepcha is one of the most unusual, as well as one of the most important, languages in the Tibeto-Burman family. It parallels Tibetan in its well preserved but rather rigid morphology, and exhibits an even more extensive system of prefixes. Initial and final consonants, including initial clusters, have in general been retained, but note final $-s > -t$, as in hrāt "bone", Tib. rus; nyāt "2", Tib. gnyis. Two sets of vocalic shifts are in operation in Lepcha. The first of these is medial or final $a > o$, as in klo "to fall", Tibeto-Burman (TB) *kla; so "to eat", TB *sa; ngo "fish", TB *ngya; (a-)tsom "hair", TB *ts'am; lom "road", TB *lam; (a-)rong "horn", TB *rang. The second is medial u (occasionally i) $> \overset{u}{a}$ (distinct from a), as in (a-)hrāt "bone", TB *rus; māt "to blow", TB *mut; lāng "stone", TB *lung; (tā-)bāk "stomach", TB *buk; tū-rāk "6", TB *d-rug; sām "3", TB *g-sum; nyāt "2", TB *g-nis; nyāl ~ nyel "gums", TB *s-nil. The medial $\overset{u}{a}$ thus developed tends to become e before final velar consonants, resulting in doublets of the

193 type rāng ~ rong "a Lepcha", sā-t'āng ~ sā-t'ong "tiger".
The medial ū is often retained in composition, e.g. sung-mūt
"wind" (mūt "to blow"), lūng- rather than lāng- in names
for varieties of stone.

The final dental morphology of Tibet (vide pt. 1) is
exactly paralleled in Lepcha, in which final -t stands for
-d, and final -n and -m for -n, the -m ordinarily being
adjectival. Thus, so "to eat", (a-)som "food", zot "to
graze", (a-)zot "pasture, food for cattle"; hru "to be hot",
(a-)hrun "hot", (a-)hrun "heat"; bu "to carry", (a-)bun
"vehicle"; t'yo "to hear", t'yon "hearing" (n.); ya "to
know", (a-)yam "knowledge", si "to be", sim "a being" (the
-m substantival forms have been selected because of their
bearing on the discussion that follows, but -n is the
typical suffix here, as in (a-)hrun "heat").

197 In Lepcha we are faced with the problem of Tibetan
rather than Indic loan-words. The Lepcha have been in
continuous contact with the Tibetans for many centuries,
hence we must dissect out several strata of loan-words
reflecting both the period of borrowing and the dialect
(including the Classical language) from which the borrowing
has been made. Many of these loan-words are easily iden-
tified, e.g. nya "fish" alongside the native form ngo (supra),
but those from an earlier stratum may conform to Lepcha
linguistic patterns and consequently pass for native forms.
Thus, nok "black" would appear to be the native term cognate
with Tib. nag (o < a, vide supra), contrasting with the

197 borrowed form nak as found in nak-o'o "the black arts" (Tib. nag-p'yogs) and other obviously recent loan-words. Yet the true native term is rather (a-)tyang "black, dark", cognate with Tsangla tsang, Kachin cang "black" (Lepcha has medial a, probably from TB *ā, in a number of important roots). So also nok "ink" from Tib. snag, unquestionably a loan-word but showing the o < a shift (if truly cognate the form would be *nyok rather than nok, vide infra). It is apparent, then, that the general semantic setting as well as the phonological development of a given Lepcha word must be considered in making our identification of it as native or Tibetan. That this is especially true of kinship terminology will be shown in the annotations below.

Lepcha Consanguineal Terms

	(a-)zo	ggF
nyi-kung gW	t'i-kung	gF
(a-)mo M	(a-)bo	F
(a-)mo tim(-bo) FoSi, MoSi	(a-)bo tim(-bo)	FOB
(a-)mo cum(-bo) MySi	(a-)bo cum(-bo)	FyB
(a-)nyu FSi, MSi	(a-)ku	FE
(a-)nom oSi, pxC	(a-)Yong	YB
	(a-)nün	oB, pxC
yeng ySb, pxC	nu	yB
(a-)küp Ch		
{ nün-küp	SbCh	
{ nom-küp		
{ küp-kong	gCh	
{ (a-)zan	gCh	
nyi-t'i	ggCh	